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# National Greatness: Teddy Roosevelt's Vision for the Twenty-First Century

David Brooks

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David Brooks is a senior editor at *The Weekly Standard*, having joined the magazine when it was founded in 1995. Before that, he worked for nine years for the *Wall Street Journal*: as movie critic, book review editor, editorial page European correspondent (covering, as well, Russia, the Middle East, and South Africa), and, finally, op-ed editor.

A graduate of the University of Chicago, Mr. Brooks also was police reporter for a Chicago wire service. He is the editor of the anthology *Backward and Upward: The New Conservative Writing* and is writing a book on the manners and morals of the information-age elite. He has been published in numerous publications—including the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *SmartMoney*, *The New Republic*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *The Public Interest*, *The National Interest*, *Commentary*, *Washingtonian*, and *National Review*—and is a frequent guest on television programs devoted to political and cultural discussions.

He spoke to a Center of the American Experiment audience in July 1998.

My wife's father was a Minnesotan named Tom Hughes who went to Washington with Orville Freeman in 1961 to go to work in the Agriculture Department. Jane grew up in the middle of the Minnesota mafia that formed in Washington, centered around Hubert Humphrey–Walter Mondale

circles. When we were married she was working with another Minnesotan, Senator David Durenberger.

Last week I happened to be walking by Senator Durenberger's old office on my way to the Capitol building. When you're walking in those buildings, you see squads of wealthy middle-aged lobby-

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ists wooing self-important twenty-two-year-old staffers. You can't help asking yourself some fundamental questions: What am I doing here? Is it smart or stupid to spend your time hanging around these people? Where is this system going to be headed in the next few years?

Durenberger's office was on the first floor of the Russell Office Building. To get to the Capitol, you first must walk the length of a vast marble hallway. If you do it while the Senate is in session, you'll probably see a few senators rushing to cast votes. You'll be able to pick out the senators, not only because they are the ones capable of absorbing infinite amounts of flattery, but also because they walk with the fast stride that powerful people like to affect. And they also tend to have enormous heads. Somebody once said that senators don't have heads; what they have on their shoulders looks like a container for a head.

They can walk fast because they don't have to carry anything. They have minions for that. You'll see the aides jogging along in a cloud of consultation behind their senator as he strides down the hall. Together their movements begin to look like a Motown group: Senator Smith and the Deference Brothers.

Capitol Hill has a two-class system: the members of Congress, whose job it is to appear on television, and the Paper People, whose job it is to read and write things, draft policy documents, and otherwise act like policy footmen: "Will you be requiring an opinion on Social Security privatization with dinner, sir?" The members get

to take credit for everything, but the Paper People get to control the substance of what gets said. You hear them talking about each other: "I hear Lott's people talked to Arme'y's people."

Or they'll say, "How's your member today? My member is happy." It sounds vaguely pornographic.

A friend of mine was serving as a Paper Person for a big business executive a few years ago, and he ghostwrote an op-ed piece on a piece of legislation. Then he went to work as policy director for a presidential candidate. The businessman sent the op-ed piece to the candidate, and my friend wrote a letter in the candidate's name lavishly praising the op-ed essay he had written in the businessman's name. These are the sort of meager pleasures Paper People live for.

Anyway, you're walking down the hallway in the Russell Office Building and the senators and their clouds of Paper People are rushing by. As you walk across the street and onto the Capitol grounds, there is a big green lawn off to your left. In the middle of that lawn there is a podium sticking out of the grass.

You wonder why: Is this a golf course for congressmen? Instead of shooting at flags they shoot at podiums?

If you go over and investigate, you see that the podium is perfectly situated so that when politicians are holding press conferences, the Capitol dome is just over their shoulders for the cameras.

This strikes me as odd, because that dome says two things: Washington and politics. And if there are two truly unpopular things in America these

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days, they are Washington and politics. When candidates are running for office, they do whatever they can to prove that they don't like Washington and are not career politicians. I think Senator Fred Thompson rented a pickup truck to drive around Tennessee to prove he was a good ol' boy and not one of those Washington politicians.

## Our Antipolitical Decade

We are living in an antipolitical decade. After World War I, the 1920s were antipolitical. After World War II, the 1950s were antipolitical. And now, after the cold war, the 1990s are another era when people withdraw from public controversies. Political books have not sold during this decade. Many of our politicians, especially Republicans in 1994, came to Washington as antipoliticians, calling it a moral swamp. Some limited their terms because they think politics is so corrupting that they would be permanently stained if they hung around too long.

The social movements that have thrived in this decade have been avowedly antipolitical. Ross Perot waged war on the entire political class and vowed to replace political bickering with a team of experts who would get under the hood and get things done. Colin Powell remains the nation's most popular leader, in part because he does not sully himself by campaigning for anything. The civil society movement emerged on the left and the right, embracing small-scale community action and explicitly renouncing politics. Other activists

look to a religious revival, not politics, to address our fundamental problems.

Even people who are politically obsessed have spent the decade railing against politics. Bill Clinton and Bob Dole presided over political conventions that more often than not resembled gushy charity telethons. You can see antipolitics reflected in the public reaction to the Clinton scandals. The Republicans detest politics so much these days they can't even explain to the American people why the presidency is important, or why they should demand high moral standards from the person who holds that job. A recent survey asked voters if they thought Bill Clinton was honest and trustworthy. Only about 36 percent said yes. Then they were asked if he is honest and trustworthy enough to be president, and 54 percent said yes.

Yet these politicians still pose in front of that dome on Capitol Hill. I think that's because—despite all our public talk about how terrible politics is—deep in our hearts, in ways we scarcely remember, we know that politics can be useful and even noble. We still have a little of the Founding Fathers' belief that while a good and admirable life can be spent making money and building a happy home, the highest life has to be devoted, in some part, to public service. The Founders detested the pettiness and sleaze that have always been part of politics, but time after time they dragged themselves off their beloved farms and back into politics.

A country that is consumed with

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politics is insufferable, but a country that denies politics altogether can never be great. I think we sense that as individuals and as a nation we are going to return to politics. The antipolitical 1920s led to the very political 1930s. The antipolitical 1950s led to the incredibly political 1960s. The apolitical 1990s too will lead to a political age.

Antipolitical eras tend to be fatalistic. People are content to let problems linger. They are willing to let large forces—scientific advances, the march of popular culture, the trends of foreign affairs—run their course without much interference and even without paying much attention. But eventually, people want to take control of their national destiny, and for that they turn to politics—for better or for worse.

The central challenge is this: We live in rich and happy times now, but sooner or later, a political revival is inevitable, and we had better come up with a governing philosophy that brings out the best in America. If we don't, some other political tradition will rise up and take its place.

For conservatives, the challenge is specific. The last great political ages—the 1930s and the 1960s—were liberal. How do we make the next one conservative?

## National Greatness Conservatism

When the design for the original Capitol building was put before George Washington, he praised its “grandeur, simplicity, and convenience.” Thomas

Jefferson, who as a premier Paper Person knew how to stick to the talking points set down by his boss, praised its “grandeur, simplicity, and beauty.”

But look at the balance of Washington's words. They reveal something not just about the building, but also about the America he hoped to create. Grandeur: if America didn't have some unique and noble mission in the world, it would cease to be America. Simplicity: Washington was emphasizing that we are not like those lavish European aristocracies; our virtues are the simple classical and natural virtues. And convenience: we Americans balance our grandeur with hardheaded practicality.

The Founding Fathers were great students of the classical authors, and so they prized balance. Balance is what we have lost in American politics. We now have one political creed—liberalism—that is largely progovernment. And we have another—conservatism—that is largely antigovernment. And then there are a lot of mushy centrists who drift with the flow of debate. The political future belongs to the party that can be balanced and at the same time dynamic.

We once had a balanced political creed that favored limited but energetic government. It's a political tradition that starts with Alexander Hamilton; goes on through Henry Clay and the Whig Party, through Abraham Lincoln and the founding of the Republican Party; is given new life by Teddy Roosevelt; and is then revived, in some respects, by Ronald Reagan. It has few proponents today, except maybe New

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York's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

This creed has come to be known as national greatness conservatism, although I blush at the grandiosity of those words. It's a creed that believes in government, but not to pursue liberal purposes, not to create a nanny state or to redistribute wealth. National greatness conservatives imagine a country whose economic diversity is counterbalanced by its cultural cohesion. They support policies that encourage individual opportunity and entrepreneurial dynamism, but they also pursue policies that bind Americans together and remind us of our common citizenship.

When Alexander Hamilton was Treasury secretary, he nationalized the debts of the thirteen states. That bound the fractious country together. But he also made the debt notes tradable—in effect turning them into paper money—because he thought Americans didn't work hard enough. By giving them greater chances to amass liquid capital, he hoped to unleash productive zeal and smash the caste system that retarded economic growth in the South. Hamilton combined the two goals: national union and individual opportunity; economic diversity and cultural cohesion.

During the Civil War, the Republicans under Abraham Lincoln passed transcontinental railroad legislation to bind the nation together with a transportation network, and also to open up opportunities to the new railroad towns. They passed the Homestead Act and the land-grant college act [the Morrill Act], and they created the

Agriculture Department, all to boost production and encourage Americans to settle the land. They created a national currency, which replaced the roughly seven thousand local currencies then in use. The goals were the same: to build national union around one currency, and to make the economy more fluid and so encourage individual opportunity.

## National Unity, Individual Opportunity

Teddy Roosevelt, at least through the time of his presidency, followed squarely in that Republican tradition. Roosevelt went after the so-called malefactors of great wealth—companies like Standard Oil and American Sugar—because he thought they used their concentrated power to trample competition. “The true function of the state,” he said, “should be to make the chances of competition more even, not abolish them.”

Roosevelt was using government to enhance entrepreneurial opportunity. We now know more about antitrust and the instability of monopolies than he knew, but his intention was to use government to liberate the individual. In some sense he was behaving as Margaret Thatcher would later behave. He was smashing vested interests—using government power—in order to clear the way for enterprising individuals. That is not a lesson to lose.

Roosevelt's attitude toward immigration also illustrates the way he championed individual opportunity and national union. He supported rela-

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tively open immigration, but also Americanization programs to inculcate American culture. We welcome all those who want to work to become American citizens, he argued, but we insist that they embrace citizenship with all it entails. That meant immigrants had to leave old world quarrels behind. It meant that all school exercises had to be conducted in English. Roosevelt detested ethnic voting blocks (which was easy for him to say, since in New York, most ethnic blocks were Democratic)—what we would call multiculturalism.

One way to promote a sense of national union, Roosevelt recognized, was to conduct an active foreign policy. His famous 1899 address, “The Strenuous Life,” was a foreign policy speech in which he argued that just as a great individual should choose a life of effort and ambition, so should a great nation. We can’t just be a nation of self-regarding consumers, he believed; we have a mission in the world. Roosevelt built up the navy during his presidency. He used American power to settle conflicts abroad.

Roosevelt believed that foreign policy is a mirror. When we see America acting cynically in the world, we think cynically about our citizenship. When we see America championing democracy, we rededicate ourselves to making America live up to its ideals.

Roosevelt’s view of our natural environment was also finely balanced. America has always been defined by its frontier experience, by its wilderness. Roosevelt set out to preserve large

tracts of our natural grandeur, like Yellowstone, for succeeding generations. But he also believed in balancing preservation with development. “The fundamental idea of forestry is the perpetuation of forests by use,” he wrote. Individuals don’t have the right to squander nature, but government doesn’t have the right to needlessly close off development. Citizenship balances individualism.

## Striking a Balance

Today the political parties, especially the Republican Party, are not good at striking this sort of balance. The Republicans are good at talking about the evils of government, about getting government off our backs, about getting more of your money back in your pocket. But the GOP no longer speaks persuasively about our national destiny. The Republicans are good at talking about local communities and faith-based charities, but, at least since Ronald Reagan left the scene, they have not been good at talking about the things that unite all Americans.

As the government shutdown of 1995 demonstrated, the American people will not trust a party to trim government bloat until it can offer a positive conservative vision of a limited but energetic government.

In policy terms, the Republicans are good at talking about school choice and giving power to parents, but they are not good at talking about the national standards and tests we will need to build cultural cohesion and to allow parents to measure the effective-

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ness of our local schools.

They are good at describing the costs of environmental regulation, but they are terrible when it comes to describing why our wilderness areas are central to our national identity, and how we should be preserving them. They are good at talking about the evils of pork-barrel spending, but they are not good at talking about the things government should be doing, like building a transportation network fit for the next century.

Many Republicans, especially on Capitol Hill, are good at griping about placing American troops in places like Bosnia, but they seem almost embarrassed to acknowledge that U.S. power in that region has brought peace and stability.

They are not good at articulating a grand U.S. mission in the world. They are not good at explaining why the Clinton foreign policy, which is largely a for-profit foreign policy, is not sufficient.

In sum, the Republicans are good at talking about the individual opportunity side of the balance. They are good at talking about devolving power, about withdrawing from global commitments, about cutting programs. But they are not good at talking about the public good. They have no self-confidence when they are combating affirmative action, bilingual education, and the other policies that balkanize America, because they are not good at celebrating national union. It is as if they have a bad conscience about Americanization.

Conservatives have trouble embracing the national side of national greatness; liberals have trouble embracing

the greatness side. It has become fashionable, especially in conservative circles, to say that we don't need another Ronald Reagan or Teddy Roosevelt. We don't need dominant leaders, because power is now going to be devolved to the lowest level. We are going to break free of political life.

If America is just going to be a large and prosperous Belgium, then that may be true. But if you stand on Capitol Hill next to that weird podium in the grass and look around, you might be reminded that America is inescapably an exceptional nation, and our exceptionalism is bred in our bones. The buildings all around, especially the Capitol in front of you and the Library of Congress building behind you, are filled with high exuberance and noble aspirations. They were built or expanded in troubled times, during the Civil War and during the depressions of the 1890s. But the crises only led the designers to express their self-confidence more fervently.

The original Library of Congress building also has a dome. Inside the dome there is a mural that shows twelve monumental figures in a ring at the top. Each figure represents a nation or epoch, and the whole ring traces the march of civilization: Egypt comes first, then Judea, Greece, Rome, Islam, and so on. The last figure is America. When the mural was done a hundred years ago, it was a stretch to say that America had qualified for a place in that chain of great nations. Now it is not a stretch. America's dominant role in the world is no small thing—to us, or to the rest of the world.

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Nations that know they are declining are not happy places. It is our job to constantly reinvigorate America so we can keep that top-dog status. And most great steps forward start with a look back. The best way to keep America forever young may be to rediscover that old but vigorous tradition of Hamilton, Clay, Lincoln, and the old Rough Rider himself, Teddy Roosevelt.

Following his talk, David Brooks took questions from Mitch Pearlstein, president of Center of the American Experiment, and other members of his audience.

Mitch Pearlstein: Let's say this new political era is beginning now. What should leaders in Washington, both in and out of government, actually do? What national ventures and adventures should we pursue?

David Brooks: The first thing to say, in all honesty, is that it's not beginning, but there are many changes I'd like to see. Our education system needs an overhaul through a combination of school choice and national standards. The Republicans took a whack at the Department of Education, thinking they would just get rid of it. This crude antigovernment gesture failed, and in the next appropriation, they gave more money to the department than the Clinton administration even asked for in order to prove they care about education. They funded bilingual education policies that they don't even support.

The Republicans need to prove that they care about education with a serious set of national tests that will give

them a chance to talk about values. They too often talk about school choice in terms of economics and competition, but the American people want to talk about the values of the school. That's what is upsetting to many parents—not merely the inefficiency. There is perfect school choice when it comes to the university system, but few conservatives would want to import the university culture to our schools. Choice alone is not enough. It has to be balanced with national standards and a common understanding of what America is about.

Immigration is another thing. I favor relatively open immigration, but think of what Georgie Anne Geyer says about immigration policy in her book *Americans No More: The Death of Citizenship*: to get citizenship, new immigrants are asked what the benefits of being an American citizen are. The correct answers are: you can get a passport, you can get a federal job, you can get your family over here. That is not all American citizenship is about, and it illustrates how shy we are about asking people to assimilate to American culture.

We need a much more aggressive and moralistic foreign policy. And our transportation system needs attention. In the New York area, the trains are slower now than they were ninety years ago. Our highways in many parts of the country were built for half the number of cars that use them now.

Preston Mathews [of the Minneapolis Public Schools]: The subject of national greatness reminds me of the death of Socrates. Is the nation so

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enveloped in fear that anybody who rose in eminence to a high standard today would be ostracized or silenced?

David Brooks: I don't know about ostracized, but look at someone like Colin Powell: he knows what he would have to do [to run for office]. Politicians have to go through the fund-raising rituals we are all familiar with. They're asking for money, and people are asking them for favors, and we are unforgiving of their failures. That is a primary factor in lack of leadership, but even that's not a barrier.

I don't think too many people are happy with any of the Republican presidential hopefuls. The last Republican candidate, Bob Dole, is a very fine man with great moral character, but he lacked an ideology to explain himself to himself. Why did he spend his life in politics? People need something to organize their thinking. Dole said he was just a man from the prairie, but he had spent most of his life in the Watergate Hotel in Washington. Being Senate majority leader isn't a bad way to spend your life, but he lacked a way to organize his thinking to move him up to that next level. That's the problem with the leadership, not that character is lacking.

Mitch Pearlstein: Who among national leaders gets close to your ideal?

David Brooks: Mayor Rudolph Giuliani of New York City is one. He will never be president, for obvious reasons, but he's got a picture of Teddy Roosevelt on his wall. I asked him what the core of Giulianiism is, and he said it's

competition—he believes in unleashing competition. He's had a tremendous impact on New York. He busted up the Mafia from the trash haulers. He reclaimed the Fulton Fish Market from Mafia control. He is beginning to change things in the schools and in the tax structure because he believes in competition. He believes in using strong government to increase individual competition.

In the past few months, even Steve Forbes has embraced Teddy Roosevelt. Even Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council, whom we think of as the quintessential religious conservative candidate, has been talking more about national identity and less about religion. I think he is right in sensing that you can't have a political movement in this country based on religion—it is too parochial and also too ambitious—but we can be united by our patriotism.

Burt Erdahl: I tend to agree with you that it is okay to have an activist government in certain areas, but I have trouble with your education example. I think the reason parents want control back is for values. Also, once you give government the testing, you've given them control, and they retain control through testing.

David Brooks: This is the best argument against what I have to say: that if we conservatives do anything, it will be taken over by people we don't like and they will turn it into something else.

The only opposition to that is the reality of the national tests we have now. They are very good tests—better

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than all but two of the state tests. They are very rigorous. When Republicans talk about how our educational system is failing, they rely on these national tests.

Unfortunately, it is illegal for the results of these tests to be broken down by district, so they are of no use in evaluating particular schools, and they are of no use to parents. If parents had access to the test results, they could measure how their student is doing on certain core skills: civics, math, English, things like that. We need to use these tests as a way to get government out of schools, to liberate the schools. We say to the schools, Okay, meet these requirements, and everything else is up to you.

Bob Martin: I didn't realize that Teddy Roosevelt was so opposed to the hyphenating of Americans. It troubles me that we are trying to pull the country together, but how can it work if we keep hyphenating? Native Americans, African Americans, Irish Americans: it just doesn't make sense, yet we continue this policy in so many different ways. When countries like England and Germany and France do their national census work, do they divide as we do with the blacks and Hispanics and Native Americans and so forth?

David Brooks: I don't know the answer to your question, but I once lived in Brussels, a nation divided by language: French speakers and what are essentially Dutch speakers. I was struck by the importance of that language barrier when I was planning a picnic with a Flemish friend, and I suggested that we go to a beautiful chateau just

ten miles away. He'd never been there: the language barrier had erected an invisible wall. Belgium has two school systems, two police departments, two parliaments. The language barrier has had a tremendous influence on the whole country.

When Teddy Roosevelt was around, immigration was at its highest level proportionately, and serious measures had to be taken to unite a big country without a good communications structure. The ugly thing that should be mentioned about Roosevelt is that, like many people in those days, he had a Darwinian ethos about races and different races having different qualities. We obviously don't want to have anything to do with that. But he expressed the national consensus, the welcoming of all people into a clear sense of Americanization, in speeches called "The New Nationalism." Nobody is giving new nationalism speeches today. n